

# Latino Youth and Justice: *Evitando Calle Sin Salida* Escaping the Dead End of Prisons



Among the participants in the recent Latino Juvenile Justice forum, Wilfredo Rojas, Director of The Office of Community Justice and Outreach and Corrections Officer, Dolores Ramos. Photo by J. Smith/El Hispano

El Hispano  
Jim Smith

Philadelphia—"Debemos buscar un sistema juvenil judicial que sea más justo, imparcial, racional, de costo efectivo y con desarrollo sostenible," dijo Bernard Schwarz, Director Juvenile Consejo de Leyes.

"Cuando permitimos a nuestros niños abrir una boca de agua de incendios durante el verano, estamos violando la ley. Un crimen pequeño, sin embargo, violamos la ley. Después de abrir una boca de agua de incendios" hará otra actividad criminal, desde "robar un zapato hasta robando un carro," dijo Wilfredo Rojas.

As of 2005, the United States has the distinction of having the highest incarceration rate of any nation on the planet.

Both nationally and at the state level, tougher sentencing guidelines, such as the "Three Strikes" laws, enacted in the 1980's and 1990's, have swelled the prison populations ten-fold, reaching over 2 million, or 724 per 100,000 residents.

The nation's leading Hispanic civil rights and policy organization, the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), in collaboration with Philadelphia's Congreso de Latinos Unidos, on Thursday evening, held a forum addressing concerns over a Justice system that is increasingly incarcerating a disproportionate number of minority and Latino youth.

As part of a four state examination of the treatment Latino youth in the Justice System, (Washington, Illinois, Pennsylvania and

Louisiana), LaRaza's Latino Juvenile Justice Network is seeking to develop the scaffolding around which it can erect a model Juvenile Justice system.

Whether any remedial recipe of legal, policy, programmatic and educational reforms emerged from this extraordinary session, Bob Schwartz, Director of the Juvenile Law Center, succinctly encapsulated its focus on the necessity of treating "kids as kids." In addition, he urged creating a Justice system that is "flex, rational, cost-effective and developmentally friendly."

"We've got too many kids thinking 'I'm going to go out there and get my hustle on.' Because that is the way we're supposed to live, that's the way we are; and that's not true," explained Edwin Desamour.

A former prisoner, who served eight and a half years of a seven to twenty year sentence for murder, Mr. Desamour provided some of the compelling testimony—that included experts in the prison system and correctional officials—that were offered in the two hour forum at the Julia de Burgos School.

The Director of the Office of Community Justice and Outreach, and a leading advocate for Latinos in prison system, Wilfredo Rojas offered a candid social perspective on the overburdened prison system, noting that, "Today we have over 8,500 inmates incarcerated in a system that is designed comfortably for 3,000 to 5,000 people."

The solution of many state officials to dealing with a growing crime problem, according to Mr. Rojas, is: "The more expensive floor you have, the more inmates we can take. Basically, they pile them in one after another."

Along with discussing the vulnerability of many juvenile offenders who are suddenly thrust into "prison with adults," Mr. Rojas stressed the link between poor education and crime. "We are finding out that there is a correlation between education, kids that have learning disabilities and crime," observed Mr. Rojas. "Many of these youth were not properly diagnosed or assessed when they were in High School. Therefore they went out and committed a crime."

A recent study found that illiteracy rates among the general population in four percent, while the illi-

teracy rate for the prison population was nineteen percent.

A Correctional Officer in the Prison system, Dolores Ramos, underlining the remarks of Mr. Rojas, recalled a young prisoner she encountered, who was visibly "pissy, telling her that he wanted to write his mother. 'But, I don't know how to write.'"

"Our children, as well as the men that are in the system," Ms. Ramos continued, "have no education. It's a terrible thing. And I'm here to let our community know that we have to pull together and educate our children."

Between ten and thirteen percent of the prison population in Philadelphia is Latino. Yet, Wilfredo Rojas cited a scarcity of Latino women involved in anti-violence programs, such as "Women In-Charge."

After noting that many of the youth come from families where the parents "are selling drugs themselves," Mr. Rojas emphasized the need for a "wholesome family," to set an example.

"If you go out and allow your child to turn on the fire plug in the summer time, you are breaking the law," added Mr. Rojas. "It's a small crime, but, you are still breaking the law."

"From turning on the fire plug, it can go to stealing somebody's hubcaps; next they might be hijacking the car; next they might be killing the guy who is in the car. So there is a progression."

"If you don't stop it at a very young age, through education and programming," Mr. Rojas went on, "we are going to have a big problem, because we are busting at the seams now."

A report by the Justice Policy Institute found that between 1980 and 2000, the prison population in Pennsylvania quadrupled, from 8,112 to 36,664. During that twenty year stretch the minority proportion of the prison population increased to seventy percent, with Latinos making up 13 percent.

A coordinator of the Latino Juvenile Justice network, Cassandra Villanueva, voiced the sense of "outrage" over the startling statistics, revealing that Latino youth are "over-represented in the Juvenile Justice system."

"We are finding more of our brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews,

locked up," and walking down the aisle of a court room, said the LaRaza coordinator, "than we are seeing walking down the aisles in High School graduations."

"These issues and decisions need to have a Latino voice and representation at the table," she said, "so that the solution is effective, and that is why we are here."

After the completion of his time in prison—a first offense—Mr. Desamour referred to the "strong family support," he found when he returned home. "I feel a lot of us need that. Not only family support, but, community support, friends, and family. People need to step in to the plate and say, 'Hey, we are going to keep you on the right path.'"

Along with his work on gang crisis intervention, Mr. Desamour speaks to groups of young people, and stressed the importance of prevention and talking to youth about prison life. "That it's a dead-end road. And that there are consequences to that," type of life.

"If you go out and allow your child to turn on the fire plug in the summer time, you are breaking the law," added Mr. Rojas. "It's a small crime, but, you are still breaking the law."

"I try to send the message to kids that: You should feel good about you; not your shirt, your claims or that hat, but you," he said. "You need to feel good about yourself and that you are somebody and can be somebody."

The Director of dance troupes, Grupo Fuego, Hector Serrano, also related an incident in which Latino youth had an altercation with a few police officers.

This two hour opening discussion of juvenile justice, organized largely by Inez Ramos of Congreso, attracted community leaders from every major Latino organization, including Johnny Itzary of the Light-house, as well as representatives from Consejo, Taller Puertorriqueño, AFM and the

*Please accept an apology for a grammatical error in an article hastily written last week, on the dancing flair of the Latin Fiesta. - J. Smith*